

JUVENAL'S SIXTH SATIRE

Despite its length and singular theme, this poem, addressed to Postumus Ursidius who is about to marry, is not a carefully structured and balanced piece of writing. Instead, it is an outpouring on the shortcomings of women. Its apparently haphazard structure does, however, conceal one central feature: the almost breathless pace and unrelieved cynicism of Juvenal, as he presents us with what amounts to a random collection of graphic and acidly delineated portraits of women to avoid at all costs.

[1] I think there was a time, back in the good old days, when you could actually find women who were chaste, women who behaved themselves. Mind you, I'm talking about a time when men froze to death in tiny caves, shut up with their gods, their animals and their hearths, all together. The women then were from the hills and they made the beds with leaves and straw and animal skins, not like the sophisticated madams who figure in all our love poetry – Catullus' Lesbia, for instance, crying her eyes out over her poor little dead bird. No, they were real wives and mothers, suckling strong babies; why, they were often just as hairy as their acorn-belching husbands. Those were the days, when the world was new, the sky was fresh. The men who lived then were born from rocks or oak trees, or moulded from clay; they had no parents.

You could still track down the occasional instance of chaste behaviour even when Jupiter ruled the heavens, but only when he was a young man without a beard. That was before the Greeks learned how to perjure themselves in court, when no one had to be bothered about a thief pinching the cabbages or the apples; people all lived in gardens without fences. But it wasn't long before the Goddess of Justice disappeared up to heaven, and her sister, Chastity, right along with her.

[2] A romp with your next-door-neighbour's wife and to hell with the divine right of marriage is now an old and well-established custom, you know, Postumus. Every other crime came along much later; adultery began a very long time ago. Yet, despite all this, in today's Rome (of all places), you've already announced your intention of getting married. You've planned the contract and the engagement, and it won't be long before some fashionable barber is giving you the works, and *your* ring is

on *her* finger. You used to be quite sane; you can't really be getting married, Postumus? You must be raving mad! You don't have to put up with a nagging tyrant of a wife, you know; you can always hang yourself – there's plenty of rope about; there are plenty of top-floor windows to jump from; you can even jump into the river: the Aemilian Bridge isn't too far.

[38] It's no use; Postumus is going to take advantage of Augustus' Family Act:⁵⁸ he wants to raise a dear little son-and-heir. Still, that means goodbye to the fine pigeons, the red mullets and all the other delights a legacy-hunter might tempt you with. Anything's possible if you can get married, Postumus! Once upon a time, everybody knew about your bedroom antics; you were in and out of hiding places like a comic actor, and now you're sticking your stupid neck right through the matrimonial noose. And if that's not enough, you're even looking for a wife with all the old moral virtues! Look, I'll get your doctor to test your blood pressure. Oh, you're priceless! Jupiter and Juno will be only too pleased to receive a sacrifice from you, if, by some chance, you meet up with a wife who's chaste. There aren't many women left who can keep out of bed long enough to qualify for a place in Ceres' procession⁵⁹ (it's only nine days!) Even their own fathers hate the idea of being kissed by them.

All right, hang a garland on your doorpost and scatter ivy berries all over your threshold in readiness for the happy day; but tell me, will one husband be enough for Hiberina? You might find it easier to make her do with only one eye! But you reckon that a girl who lives with her father on his estate in the country has an untarnished reputation. Well, if she goes on living in some little country village as she did on her father's estate, then I'll believe you; but you can't kid me that nothing ever happens up mountains or in caves. Jupiter and Mars aren't past it yet, you know. Can you find a woman in Rome's arcades who's worth all the love and attention? What about the theatres? Look at every block of seats and you'll not find one woman you could love without fear, not one you would want to take away from it all. When some gay ballet-dancer takes the part of Leda, with all the movements, the women go beserk. One gets really carried away, another loses all control. The girl from the country pays close attention; she's learning just what to do.

[67] But when the curtains have closed on this year's season, the empty theatres are all shut up and only the law courts drone away all summer long, other women are so bored they latch onto

some cheap show – and the actor's tights! One performer got a laugh or two by his impersonation of some legendary female and immediately one poor woman fell head over heels in love with him. Some women will pay a fortune for a night with a comic actor; there are others who will strain the vocal chords of any concert singer; there's always one who fancies a tragic actor. Well, you can hardly expect them to curl up with a good book when the live performer's ready and waiting. You might marry a wife, but it will be a lyre-player or a flautist who will be the father of 'your' child. You may be getting ready to celebrate the birth of the infant, hanging bunches of laurels from the doorposts, but the face your high-born son presents to the world from under his mosquito net will bear a curious resemblance to a well-armed brute from the arena.

[82] You'll remember Eppia; she was married to a senator, but she ran off to that den of vice, Alexandria, with her gladiator lover. Even Egypt was shocked by the wicked immorality of Rome. She didn't give a thought for her home, her husband or her sister; she couldn't have cared less about her country or her children – the hussy! But this will really knock you back on your heels – she was even prepared to give up the Games, and her favourite ballet-dancer! She may have been brought up smothered in riches and swansdown by her father; she may have slept as a baby under a luxurious quilt, but now she's not a bit frightened by thoughts of a sea journey, any more than she is by thoughts of a ruined reputation; *that* doesn't bother our cosseted females these days. She's quite prepared to put up with the ragings of the Mediterranean; however many seas she has to cross, she faces them with a brave spirit. Now when women have to face danger for a just and honourable reason, they're really frightened, their hearts are struck cold with panic and they can barely stand on their trembling feet; but if they're up to no good, they're as brave as the next man. If she goes on board ship at her husband's instructions, she can't stomach the smell of the bilges, and the sky up above spins round to make her dizzy. But if she's running away with her lover, she's not the slightest bit seasick. The wife throws up all over her husband, but the mistress takes a bit to eat with the sailors, wanders around the deck and enjoys a good tug at their tough ropes.

[103] So what were these youthful good looks that inflamed Eppia's passions? She must have seen something in him to have allowed herself to be called 'The Gladiatress'; what was it? Her darling Sergius was pushing forty, with a useless arm which

guaranteed early retirement; and his face was a real mess: covered in scars from his helmet, a huge wart on his nose, and one eye that was continually running. But all that doesn't matter; he was a *gladiator*. That's what turns them all into heart-throbs; this is what she gave it all up for – children, country, sister, husband. The hard steel is what they all fancy. Once this Sergius is pensioned off, he'll seem no more exciting than her husband.

[114] Of course, you may not care about what goes on in private households, or about Eppia's behaviour. In that case, take a look at those equals of the gods, the emperors. Just listen to what Claudius had to put up with. When his wife, Messalina, saw that he was asleep, this imperial whore had the gall to leave her couch in the palace and make her way to any old blanket-strewn bed. She would put on a hooded cloak and slip out of the palace with one single slave girl. She hid her black hair under a blonde wig and made straight for the local brothel, with its atmosphere of stale, sweat-soaked blankets. She had a room there, just for her own use, empty and ready; the sign over the door gave a false name: 'Lycisca' – the Wolf-Girl. Here she stripped naked and flashed her gold-painted body, showing off its charms. Then she 'entertained' all the customers, one by one, demanding cash on the nail for her services, and when the brothel-keeper sent all his other girls home, she was always the last to shut up shop and slink miserably away, still full of desire and worn out by the men, but without satisfaction. With the grime and sweat on her face and the smoke from the lamps, she brought back to the palace the stink of the brothel.

I needn't tell you about love charms and magic spells, or the potions brewed up for stepsons. The power of sex forces women to far worse actions; sexual desire is the key trigger for their immoral behaviour.

'All right; how come Censennia's husband thinks she's perfect?'

Well, to start with, there's the dowry; that was worth a million: that's how much it cost her to be labelled 'chaste'. He never wasted away, eaten up with love for her; all his passion was reserved for the cash. All she did was buy her own freedom. She can even flash the 'come-and-get-me' eyes and write love-letters while her husband's about: a rich woman who marries a miser can behave just like a widow.

[142] 'Fair enough. But why is Sertorius head over heels in love with Bibula?'

If you get to the truth of the matter, it's the face, not the

woman, he loves. At the first sign of wrinkles, as soon as he spots the dry, flabby skin, black teeth and dull eyes, his freedman will spell it out for her: 'Pack your bags! Leave immediately! You're getting on our nerves with your continual sniffing. Go on, smart-ish; there's another wife due, whose nose doesn't run like yours.' Till then, she's never had it so good. She's in charge and plagues her husband for shepherds, fine sheep and Falernian vineyards. And that's not all! She wants all his slave-boys and chain-gang prisoners as well; she must keep up with the neighbours. Then in winter, when the market comes to town, and its stalls block up all our nice murals, like that one of old Jason, the wool merchant and his Argonauts, she'll buy up huge crystal vases, even bigger ones of agate and a famous diamond ring. (Princess Berenice⁶⁰ wore it once, that's why it's so expensive. It was given to her by her brother, that foreigner, Agrippa – they were lovers, you know – in the land of the barefoot Sabbath⁶¹ and protected pigs that live to a ripe old age.)

[161] 'Are you saying that there isn't a single woman in all the world worth considering?'

All right, let's imagine a real beauty, a real charmer, rich and ripe for childbearing, halls full of ancestors' statues, even more chaste than those Sabine women who let their hair down and stopped a war – a rare bird, she would be, a real black swan! But who could put up with a wife as perfect as that? I'd much prefer a real back-street whore to some stuck-up 'mother of statesmen', all airs and graces and good works (she even counts the public honours voted to her ancestors as additions to her dowry!) She knows what she can do with Hannibal,⁵² Syphax, and Carthage – the whole works! What was it that mythical king, Amphion,⁶³ cried out?

'Spare us, Apollo; Artemis, please don't shoot! It's not the children's fault; kill their mother, Niobe!'

But Apollo took aim and the proud Niobe had to watch her children die, and her husband, too, and all because she had the gall to boast she was a better mother than Leto, and was more fertile than the old sow of Alba Longa, Romulus' home town.

[187] Is any dignity or beauty worth so much you can put up with it being pushed down your throat all the time? There's no pleasure in such rare and exquisite perfection, when sheer arrogance makes the sweetness of it bitter. No one is so keen on his wife that, while he praises her to the skies, he doesn't secretly find her abominable for more than half the day. Her faults may seem

insignificant but her husband can't stand them. For example, what is more disgusting than a true Italian girl who thinks she is not at all fashionable or good-looking unless she's all dolled up in the latest Greek style? Imagine some small-town female dressed up like an Athenian *femme fatale*! They talk nothing but Greek, but the shame of it is they don't even know Latin properly. They scream their fears in Greek, they get angry, happy, worried, all in Greek; they release the innermost secrets of their souls in Greek.

It may be all right for the young girls, but when you're knocking eighty-six, it's a bit much still to use Greek. Old women shouldn't talk dirty: all that *Zoe kai Psyche* – 'My Life, My Soul' stuff is only fit for love-making in private, not to be thrown about in public. Sweet nothings like that are like fingers to tickle any man's fancy, but don't push your luck too far – you might speak more softly and seductively than any randy actor, but your face registers your advancing years.

[200] So if you're not going to love the woman you're legally bound to, what's the point of getting married at all? What a waste! A good meal for all the guests, and when they've stuffed themselves at your expense and are quietly slipping away, don't forget the little cakes you have to give them. And then there's the offering of newly-minted coins commemorating the latest victories (hers, too?), a gleaming dishful for that very first night.

Still, if your mind's made up and you're bent on having a wife (and only one), bend your head and get ready to put on the yoke like some submitting ox. You'll never find a single woman who will treat the man she loves fairly. She might really be on fire with love for him but she still enjoys tormenting him and wheedling what she can from him. The better he is as a person, the more desirable he is as a husband, the less he will get out of his wife. You'll not be able to give anyone a present unless she agrees to it; she will have sole control over any buying or selling you might do. She'll tell you who to be friends with; your oldest friends you've known all your life will find the door barred against them. Pimps, trainers and gladiators can leave their money to anyone they like; you'll have to mention several of her lovers in your will.

'Just crucify that slave!' she says.

'What for? What has he done to deserve that? Are there any witnesses? Who informed on him? Hear his case, at least. It doesn't matter how long you delay when a man's life is in the balance.'

'You're mad! Are you calling a slave, a *man*? Well, have it your

own way: he didn't do anything. I still want him crucified – no, I *command* it. The fact that I want it done is reason enough to do it.'

That's how she'll boss her husband about. But she'll soon get bored with one little kingdom and move on to the next, continually changing her address until her wedding veil is worn out. Then she'll come back to fill again the dents in a pillow she once turned her back on, leaving behind her a whole string of wedding decorations, with green branches still hanging round the door. That's another husband to add to the list; that makes eight in five years – she ought to inscribe it on her tombstone!

[231] You'll never have a peaceful life while your mother-in-law is alive. She's the one who teaches her daughter to strip the very shirt off your back, and have a good time with the profit. She's the one who teaches her to answer some boy-friend's love-letters with just the right amount of subtle coyness and artful suggestiveness; she tricks the slaves or slips them a bribe; her daughter may be perfectly fit, but she calls in some high-class physician for her as she tosses about under the heavy blankets. While this is going on, her daughter's fancy man keeps quiet in his hiding place, barely able to contain his impatience. You can't really expect a mother like that to bring her daughter up better than herself. Anyway, it's worth the old tart's while to train her daughter for the game.

There's hardly been a court case where the first rule wasn't *cherchez la femme*. She'll be the plaintiff, if she's not already the defendant. She'll put the formal pleas together herself, always on hand to tell the lawyer how to open the case and put all his points.

[246] Then there are the women who wrap themselves in the purple athlete's blankets and splash themselves with wrestling oil. You've seen them attacking their dummy opponents, stabbing them with dummy swords, thrusting their shields forward, going through the exercises by number – the sort of ladylike behaviour you expect at the Floral Games.⁶⁴ Maybe she's set her sights on something more sensational; perhaps she's training for the real arena. You can't really expect a woman in a helmet to feel much sense of shame; she's a traitor to her sex: all she enjoys are feats of strength. Mind you, she stops short at wanting to *be* a man; it's nowhere near as much fun! What an honour it is for a man to be present at an auction of his wife's property: sword-belt, armlets, plumes, shinguard (left leg only). Or maybe she fights as

a Thracian gladiator; well you'll really be delighted when the sweet girl puts her greaves up for sale! Yet these are the same women who find the thinnest blouse too hot; who find the finest silk too rough for them. Listen to the groans as she does her set exercises; you can almost feel the weight of the helmet which makes her stoop. Look at those bandages on her haunches, how thick and coarse they are! And what a laugh it all is, when she puts down her weapons to squat for a pee! You can ask any daughter of our great aristocratic families and they'll tell you, reluctantly, that no gladiator's wife ever dressed up like this, or panted away at sword-practice.

[268] A bed with a wife in it is always full of arguments and mutual slanging; you'll get precious little sleep there! Bedtime's the time she goes for her husband, more savage than a tigress deprived of her cubs. Well aware of her own guilt, she invents complaints about his boy-friends, or makes up a mistress to weep over. She has tears by the gallon all ready to flow wherever and whenever she pleases. You think they're signs of love, you miserable worm, you're actually pleased; you kiss her tears away; and all the time her desk is crammed with notes and love-letters, like the jealous whore of a wife she is. Suppose you actually catch her in bed with a slave or some gentleman friend.

'Tell me, Quintilian,' she'll say, 'what clever excuse would you use for a tight spot like this?'

'I'm stumped,' says our greatest professor of rhetoric. 'Make one up for yourself.'

So she says: 'We agreed ages ago that you and I could do just as we pleased. It's all very well for you to start shouting and turning the world upside down, but I'm a human being, too.' You can't beat a woman caught in the act for downright brazen cheek; her own guilt creates her anger and arrogance. Where do these monstrosities come from? Where do they originate? You may well ask. In the old days Roman women were chaste because they were poor. Sheer hard grind and insufficient sleep prevented their little homes from being corrupted; you know, rough hands from working the wool, Hannibal coming closer, their husbands on guard at the gate. We've been too long at peace and we're suffering for it. That feeling – 'we've never had it so good' – is deadlier than any weapon; it lies heavy upon us and takes vengeance for the world we have conquered. Ever since poverty at Rome became a thing of the past, we've had every form of crime and

lust to contend with. All those Greek places – Sybaris, Rhodes, Miletus, even Tarentum, where some drunken reveller dared to insult a Roman official – have poured themselves all over our seven hills. Crude cash first brought foreign morals to our city; wealth made us weak as the years went on and disgraceful self-indulgence broke our spirit. Our very own Venuses couldn't care less about anything when they're roaring drunk; they guzzle huge oysters at midnight parties, drink vintage wine laced with perfume neat from the scent bowls and watch the ceiling spin round, the tables dance and each light burn in pairs.

[306] Then again you might wonder why Maura turns up her nose at the odd smell as she passes by the Temple of Chastity, with her best friend, Tullia, who seems to be saying something to her. Every night they stop their litters and relieve themselves all over the goddess's statue. Then while the full moon looks on, they take it in turns to give each other rides; and then they go home. Next morning, on your way to visit one of your important friends, you'll walk right through a puddle made by your wife.

[314] We all know about the so-called 'secret' rites of the Good Goddess! The flutes, the pipes and the wine really turn on those crazy followers of the old fertility god and make them whirl around, howling their heads off. They're so mad keen to get into bed with someone! You should hear their cries as their passion rises within them. Saufeia takes off her wreath and challenges the call-girls to a hip-grinding contest, which she easily wins; but even she has to hand it to Medullina's supple movements – sheer poetry in motion! So the prize remains with the real ladies whose talents match their pedigrees. Please note, this is not a simulation; this is the real thing, a sure-fire turn-on, even for frosty old men like Priam or Nestor. At last they're itching to start, can't wait a moment longer; they're all woman, pure and simple, and they start to shout repeatedly, from every part of their lair: 'Now, now! We're ready! Let the men in!' If one lover's asleep, another is bundled into his cloak and hurried along. If there's nothing doing from that quarter, they make a bee-line for the slaves, and if they turn out to be hopeless, they'll even call in a water-carrier.

[346] I know what my old friends would say: 'Lock your wife up; keep her indoors.' All very well, but who'll keep an eye on those guarding her? They'll get due reward for turning a blind eye to the comings-and-goings of their randy mistress. Shared wrongdoings keep both parties quiet. A sensible wife will arrange things in advance, starting with those nearest to her. High-born

aristocrat or low-class peasant-girl, they all have the same passions. The woman who walks on the pavements is no better than the woman who rides in a litter carried by her Syrian slaves.

[352] Take Ogulnia; her passion's the games. In order to watch, she hires a dress, companions, a litter, a cushion, girlfriends, a nurse, and a blonde girl to run errands for her. Yet whatever's left of the family silver, right down to the very last plate, she'll dish out as a present to some smooth athlete. Money is tight in many homes, but no woman thinks herself so poor that she has to ease up on expense or stick to the limits that lack of money imposes. Now men do sometimes show foresight in this respect; they remember the fable of the ant, who taught people to fear cold and hunger, and they make provisions accordingly. But an extravagant woman has no idea when the cash is running out. She thinks the money in her cash-box grows on trees and will simply replenish itself when the pile runs out, and she never gives a thought to the cost of the good times she's having.

[379] If your wife enjoys music, she'll always have an instrument in her hands, running her fingers all over it, her rings flashing as she plucks at her lyre; and she'll use a plectrum once owned by the great Hedymeles to practise scales on the strings. She'll grasp it and console herself with it, and kiss the dear object all over. A certain lady of aristocratic background went so far as to make offerings of wine and cakes to Janus and Vesta, in the hope that she would find out whether her favourite musician would win the top prize for playing the lyre. She could hardly have done more if her husband had been ill, or the doctors had already despaired of her little son's life. She stood at the altar and showed no shame as she veiled her head for her darling musician; she repeated the ritual formula and even went white at the sight of the lamb as it was cut open for inspection. Now tell me, Old Father Janus, do you really listen to requests from women like these? You must be hard up for something to do, you lot in heaven; as far as I can see, there's not much happening to keep you all busy. One woman is anxious to consult you about comic actors, another is keen to recommend a tragic artiste; with all this standing about at sacrifices, the diviners will soon get varicose veins!

[398] Still, better to have a musical wife than a flat-chested, straight-faced woman who dashes boldly about all over town, turning up at all-male gatherings, telling the generals in uniform just what to do – and while her husband's there, too. She's the

type who knows what's going on all over the world: what the Chinese or the Thracians are up to, the intimate secrets of a step-mother and her son, who's in love with whom, which adulterer is the number one fancy. She'll tell you who made the widow pregnant, and when; what every woman whispers to her lover in bed.

She's the first to see a comet spelling doom and destruction for some king in Armenia or Parthia; she's always first with the news and gossip picked up at the city gates – she even makes some of it up: 'River Niphates bursts its banks; whole countries under mountains of floodwater! Cities collapse, land subsides!' These are the stories she tells to anyone and everyone: a real street-corner newscaster!

[413] Another intolerable type of woman is the kind who always whips her poor neighbours half to death if they so much as wake her up: suppose some barking dog disturbs her slumbers, 'Bring me the clubs and look sharp about it!' she shouts. Then she orders a sound thrashing for the owner, and another for the dog. A formidable woman to come across, and a horror to look at. She always makes for the baths at night. That's when she orders her oil flasks and all the rest of her equipment to be taken there: she really enjoys the noise and sweat of the place. As soon as her arms are tired out with swinging the weights, the crafty masseur gives her a caress or two as he strokes her thigh and makes it sound to the slap of his palm. Meanwhile her dinner guests are really fed up; some are dozing, others are starving to death. At last she appears, looking red all over and with a raging thirst: she looks ready to drain the three-gallon jar at her feet. She puts away a couple of pints 'as an aperitif, to whet the appetite', but she throws up immediately and sloshes the floor with her puke. It runs all over the marble pavement in streams and the gilt jerry stinks of vintage wine. She's like a snake that's fallen into a vat, guzzling and spewing. No wonder her husband, sick to death of her, closes his eyes and struggles to hold back his anger.

[434] But far worse must be the woman who has hardly taken her place at the dinner table before she begins to praise Vergil's poetry and speaks in support of the doomed Dido. Then she weighs up the relative merits of the two greatest poets, putting Vergil and Homer in the scales. Teachers of literature have to give way, professors are beaten, the whole crowd falls silent, no word from a lawyer or auctioneer; not even another woman dare utter a syllable. Her words create such a din, it sounds more like a load of dishes and bells clanging together.

There's no need for anyone to blow a trumpet or clash a cymbal to protect the moon from the danger of witchcraft! Now a wise person will set a limit to all things, even good behaviour, so if she wants to appear clever and gifted in speaking, she should dress like a man with a knee-length tunic, sacrifice a pig to Silvanus (men only) and scrub down at the baths with the boys.

Make sure that the woman with whom you sit down to dinner does not have a 'proper' style of speaking, someone who loads her conversation like a catapult and fires her arguments like shots. Take care, too, that she's not an historical expert; far better to have one that doesn't understand everything she reads. I can't stand a woman who's forever quoting some standard grammar book, who always follows the rules when she speaks, and keeps on quoting lines from poems that I've never heard of; she even tells off her less cultured girl-friends for mistakes no man would be worried about: at least she ought not to correct her husband's *faux pas*.

[457] When a woman has put on an emerald necklace and weighed down her ears with huge pearl ear-rings, she's ready for anything, no matter how outrageous. Nothing is more intolerable than a woman with money. But what a sight she is, and how ridiculous! She plasters her face with dough like a face-pack, and splashes it all over with creams (as used by the emperor's wife), so that her poor husband's lips get stuck in the muck when he tries to kiss her! Yet she cleans it all off when she goes to meet her lover; it's all right for her to look a mess around the house. The perfumes, specially imported from India, are for her lover's benefit. Finally she starts to reveal her face, peeling off one layer after another until she begins to be recognisable, then she freshens her face with asses' milk (she takes a whole herd with her whenever her husband is posted to a chilly northern province). But when you consider all the layers of medicaments and the soft dough face-pack, you might start wondering whether it's a face underneath or an ulcer.

[474] It's well worth your while taking a closer look at precisely what these women do all day long. If her husband didn't fancy her the night before, she really lays into the girl who measures the wool for spinning, she strips the dressers for a flogging, she accuses the litter-bearer of arriving late; in fact, they all get punished because someone else dozed off: one slave is beaten with rods till they break, another is almost flayed alive, while a third gets a terrible lashing (some women keep their torturers on

annual contracts). While the flogging goes on, she puts on her make-up, or chats with her girl-friends, or pays close attention to the width of some gold-embroidered material (and the flogging goes on), or she reads right through the daily news bulletin (and the flogging goes on), until the floggers collapse with exhaustion, then she shouts 'Clear off!' and the trial is over.

[486] She rules her household as cruelly as a Greek colonial dictator. If she has a date and wants to look a little better turned out than usual, and she's in a rush because her boy-friend's waiting for her in the park or by the brothel – sorry, temple – of Isis, she'll grab her poor little slave-girl coiffeuse by the hair and strip her to the waist: 'Why is this curl standing up like this?' she shouts, and flogs the poor girl with a whip as a punishment for the curl that offends her. Why was it the girl's fault, anyway? Could you blame her because you don't like the shape of your own nose? Another slave-girl on the left combs out her mistress's hair and curls it up. One member of the advisory body is an older slave, who once belonged to her mother and has now moved on from sewing to working in wool. She offers the first opinion, followed by those younger and less skilled: you'd think they were discussing a point of honour, or a matter of life or death; the beauty game's obviously a great responsibility! The finished hair-style towers like a building, all those tiers, all those storeys! She looks really statuesque from the front; from behind it's a rather different story, especially if she's so short that, without high heels, she's no bigger than a pygmy; she even has to stand on tip-toe for a kiss! Meanwhile, she couldn't care less about her husband, or the bills she runs up on his account. She's more like a neighbour than a wife, until there are some friends or slaves to find fault with, or some spare cash to spend.

[511] Look! Here comes a procession of followers of the frenzied goddess, Bellona,⁶⁵ and of the Mother of the Gods. At the head is a giant eunuch, looked up to by those lower than him. Some time ago he castrated himself, and now not even his raucous mob, nor the tambourines can scream louder than he can. His plebeian cheeks are framed by an eastern headdress. 'Beware the hot and dusty winds of September!' he warns her grimly. 'Put out a hundred eggs for self-purification and give me some old, russet-coloured clothes so that any unforeseen disaster may pass into them.' A real bargain: one whole year's absolution settled in advance!

On a chilly winter morning she'll make her way down to the

Tiber, break the ice and slip into the water, plunging her head three times into the swirling stream, like some nervous initiate. From there, naked and trembling, she'll crawl on bloody knees across the Campus Martius. If Isis⁶⁶ requires it she'll even travel to Egypt, bring water from the blistering heat of the isle of Meroë to sprinkle over the temple of the goddess which stands near the ancient voting areas on the Campus. She believes she has received the call from the goddess herself – as if the gods would spend the night talking to a mind and soul like hers! But it does explain why she shows a special reverence for Anubis, the dog-headed god, who runs through the crowd with his followers with their shaven heads and linen tunics, laughing at the devotees who are grieving for the death of Osiris. He's the one, you see, who gets the women off when they don't abstain from sex on the holy days, and he punishes them severely if they sleep around or when the silver serpent⁶⁷ appears to move its head. He weeps and mumbles carefully rehearsed prayers to persuade Osiris to grant the woman a pardon, but he bribes him first with a fat goose and a slice of holy cake.

[542] His place is immediately taken by a Jewess with the palsy, who leaves her haybox⁶⁸ behind and starts to beg for alms as though she were whispering secrets into your dear wife's ear. She's an official interpreter, she says, of the Laws of Jerusalem, a high priestess from the temple of trees, a trusted go-between of heaven. So she gives her something, too, but she's not too generous, for Jews will always do you a nice dream very cheap.

An eastern fortune-teller can look at the lungs of a dove, newly-dead, and promise a new love-affair, or a hefty inheritance from some rich old bachelor. He'll dissect a chicken, disembowel a puppy, or even a child. He'll always arrange it so that he can inform on his client.

People will place more faith in a Chaldaean astrologer:⁶⁹ whatever he utters, they think it has come straight from the fountain of Ammon. Now that Delphi⁷⁰ has gone out of business, we're all in the dark about our futures. There was one such astrologer, very successful, frequently exiled, who used his friendship and a fixed horoscope to do away with the Emperor Galba, a man greatly feared by the next emperor, Otho. It seems an astrologer's only worth trusting if he's served his time in prison, chained and manacled. People believe in his powers only if he has been reprieved from a death sentence at the eleventh hour, or has been deported to some far-off Greek island.

[565] Your wife is an eager client of horoscope merchants like these. She wants to know why her poor mother, suffering from jaundice, is *still* alive, when she can hope to bury her sister or her uncles, whether her lover will go on living after her – the gods couldn't give her a nicer present. (Don't worry, she's already enquired about you, some time ago.) Still, at least she doesn't know everything about the baleful influences of Saturn, or when Venus moves into a lucky phase, which are the profitable months and which the months of loss. You want to watch out for the woman who always carries well-worn almanacs about like balls of scented amber; she's not after advice: she gives it. Her husband may get a provincial posting, or may be returning from one. If the horoscope forbids it, she'll not go with him. She won't even take a short trip from home without checking with her prediction tables for the best time. If an eye infection starts to itch and irritate her, she'll check the charts first before sending for some ointment. If she's ill in bed, she'll eat only when the astrologers say it is safe to do so.

[582] Women of the lower classes make for the circus track, where they get their heads and hands read, making sure they smack their lips to ward off the evil eye. Rich women hire fortune-tellers from the mysterious East, who know all there is to know about astrology, or perhaps one of the old men who take care of thunderbolts on behalf of the public. The fate of common people is marked out in the circus or on the embankment; that's where the old slags come to find out their fortunes. What's it to be, give the innkeeper the push and shack up with the rag-and-bone man?

At least these women go through with childbirth, put up with the dangers, and with the nuisance of nursing, because in their position they can do nothing else. But there's hardly a rich woman's bed that sees a pregnancy through to its natural conclusion. Those who are paid to fix an abortion have plenty of drugs to cause sterility, and a lot of experience in these matters. It's not so bad really, you know, so give her the stuff yourself. What if she decided to have a brood of bouncing babies? You might find yourself the father of some black infant, then you'll be drawing up your will in favour of some half-caste heir who ought never to have seen the light of day.

[602] I shan't dwell on adopted children, picked up by the city's foul water tanks to fulfil the wishes and prayers of disappointed parents. Some of these will one day become our priests and noblest aristocrats! Unfair Fortune is to blame: she stands

like some secretly amused night-watch over these naked infants, tends to their needs, takes them in her arms, and then distributes them to the highest families in Rome, as though this were some private farce; she gives them love and care as though they were special offspring of her own.

Here's someone with magic spells, and here a love-potion salesman. A wife can send her husband crazy with these; he'll even get her to wallop his behind with a slipper. Are *you* suffering from absent-mindedness, blackouts or temporary amnesia? Can *you* remember what you did yesterday? If not, your wife's potions may be to blame. Still, you can probably put up with that, as long as you're not driven stark raving mad, as Nero's uncle Caligula was by Caesonia, his wife, who slipped a little aphrodisiac into his bedtime drink. But when in Rome, do as the emperor's wife does. The city really declined and almost fell then; it was as if Juno had driven Jupiter out of his wits. By comparison, Agrippina's mushroom⁷¹ was a mere flash in the pan. All that did was send some doddering old fool called Claudius on his head-shaking, lip-slobbering way down to a mortal's paradise. (He couldn't quite make it up to the other one.) The poison Caesonia brewed up caused untold killing, arson and torture; upper and middle classes were all butchered together. All this was the price of one potion, and of one woman to concoct it.

[627] Women can't stand a mistress's children; well, that's perfectly understandable; who would think otherwise? Killing stepchildren is the right thing to do. A word of warning to all adopted children (especially those with piles of cash in trust): keep your wits about you; treat every dish with suspicion: every pie is piping hot with poison provided by mother. You should get someone to taste all the dishes she offers you; perhaps your timid tutor should drink from the cup before you do.

'Now come on, I can hear somebody say, you're making it up! This reads more like some tragic drama than a satire! You're really going much too far, making it sound like something out of Sophocles;⁷² this is Italy, you know, it doesn't fit in here at all!' If only you were right! But here's a woman admitting she murdered her children: 'I did it, I confess, I poisoned my children. Everyone knows all about it; I did it with my own hands.' What! *Two* children at one meal? Two? You viper! 'I would have done away with seven if I had had them!'

[643] We may well believe what the tragic playwrights tell us about Medea⁷³ and Procne; I'll not dispute it. They were wicked

monsters in their own day – but they didn't do it for cash. We can begin to understand such monstrous acts when they are prompted by anger or a raging, reckless passion. They are carried headlong like a boulder in a landslide. What I can't stand is the woman who plots the whole thing like a cold-blooded schemer. Our wives quite calmly sit and watch Alcestis⁷⁴ dying on behalf of her husband; given half a chance, they'd happily let their husbands die instead of their pet dogs. You can meet tragic villainesses everywhere; Clytemnestras⁷⁵ on every street corner. One slight difference though: Clytemnestra had to swing an axe; nowadays, toad's poison does the trick quite nicely. Still, swords may become popular again, if our up-to-date Agamemnons keep taking the antidotes!

- 58 **Augustus' Family Act** This was a law passed by Augustus in 18 B.C. and later amended. It limited the rights of unmarried citizens to receive inheritances and gave privileges in public life to the fathers of large families.
- 59 **a place in Ceres' procession** A festival for the goddess Ceres, held in August, involved a procession of women who had to abstain from sexual intercourse for nine days previously.
- 60 **Berenice** A Jewish princess, sister of Herod Agrippa; she and Herod were said to have had an incestuous relationship.
- 61 **barefoot Sabbath** Juvenal refers to Jewish religious practice, here, as elsewhere, with irreverence.
- 62 **Hannibal** Juvenal is referring to Cornelia, the daughter of Scipio Africanus, the Roman general who defeated Hannibal and Syphax and so ended the war against Carthage.
- 63 **Amphion** Husband of Niobe in Greek legend. He offered his wife's life if Artemis and Apollo spared their children.

- 64 **Floral Games** A festival held at the end of April. Women, including prostitutes, took a leading role and there was much promiscuous behaviour.
- 65 **Bellona** See Note 31.
- 66 **Isis** Egyptian goddess, whose cult was extremely popular in Rome during the early Empire, especially among women. The orgiastic rituals and colourful processions made an exciting change from the dull Roman state religion.
- 67 **the silver serpent** The sacred asp, symbol of royalty in Egypt. Cleopatra used it to commit suicide.
- 68 **haybox** See Note 11.
- 69 **Chaldaean astrologer** Astrologers and fortune-tellers had a great vogue in Rome. Many came from Asia Minor and the East.
- 70 **Delphi** The prophecy centre of the Greek world, at its height of popularity and power during the fifth century B.C.
- 71 **Agrippina's mushroom** See Note 57.
- 72 **Sophocles** Greek tragic dramatist 496–406 B.C.
- 73 **Medea and Procne** For Medea see Note 45. Procne killed her child in revenge for her husband's rape of her sister Philomela.
- 74 **Alcestis** She died in place of her husband Admetus, king of Thessaly, who was doomed to die unless a substitute could be found.
- 75 **Clytemnestra** Wife of Agamemnon, king of Mycenae. She killed him on his return from Troy, in revenge for the sacrifice of their daughter Iphigeneia.